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Flogging a Dead Language: Identity Politics, Sex,
and the Freak Reader in Acker's Don Quixote

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1. Pastiche is central to the resistant politics of Kathy Acker's writing--yet she would appear to agree with Fredric Jameson's influential critique of pastiche as "the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language" (17). Her 1986 novel *Don Quixote* is all about having to speak "in a dead language" in the absence of a more "healthy" norm. It begins with the death of the protagonist, a female version of Cervantes's knight, who then goes on to narrate much of the subsequent story. Acker explains, "BEING DEAD, DON QUIXOTE COULD NO LONGER SPEAK. BEING BORN INTO AND PART OF A MALE WORLD, SHE HAD NO SPEECH OF HER OWN. ALL SHE COULD DO WAS READ MALE TEXTS WHICH WEREN'T HERS" (39). The novel then proceeds by plagiarism and pastiche, as Quixote goes on a quest--for a heterosexual love unsullied by patriarchal power relations--through fragments of numerous existing texts. Quixote rereads and pieces together a whole range of textual scraps, from Machiavelli's *The Prince* to a Godzilla movie. What becomes clear in her eccentric survey of (primarily) Western culture is that the lost, healthy linguistic norm is more than unhealthy for female readers--indeed, it is deadly.
2. The novel is motivated by the idea of both reading and speaking "in a dead language"--but "flogging a dead language" seems a more apt description of Acker's strategy, in more ways than one. For both the reader in and the reader of the novel, the act of rereading that pastiche entails can seem like flogging a dead horse, in the sense of merely covering once again the familiar ground of the already said. Of course, the same has been said of any reading in postmodernity where all language may well be dead, having belonged properly to a previous historical moment that gave it life and from which it has now been dissociated by forces of commercial appropriation and cultural amnesia. But this generic deadness that Jameson identifies as inherent in postmodern writing is not quite what I wish to explore.
3. Rather, I want to attempt to account for what I see as a particular familiarity, and perhaps a particular tendency toward exhaustion and redundancy, that accompanies reading Acker's texts from this period in her career, a period characterized by Acker's extensive use of pastiche or what she frequently refers to as "plagiarism." In what follows, I look at what happens to and through the act of reading, to ask how reading is connected to agency. Despite the considerable difficulty of Acker's experimental novels, reading them can become an activity weighed down by a certain deadening obviousness. I want to suggest that this lifelessness derives from Acker's attempts to construct, through pastiche, a community of

readers defined by their opposition to traditional literary culture. I want also to argue that her deployment of pastiche in specific contexts--especially sexual contexts--in fact complicates and undermines the static and oversimplified role that she sometimes seems to offer her reader. In such moments, a complex interplay of various possible readerly identifications creates a contingent and particular version of agency.

4. In a chapter on Acker in his recent book on literary celebrity, Joe Moran has suggested that in both her public persona and her work, Acker "puts forward two contrasting views of identity--one textual and one essentialist" (142). While he locates these competing versions in Acker's characters and in her own public performance of the (death of the) author, I wish to extend his observations and apply them also to the modes of reading suggested by her texts, and by this novel in particular. The "textual" version of identity, generally celebrated by those critics friendly to Acker's work, is readily apparent in the cut-and-paste technique of *Don Quixote*, in which borrowed textual fragments are reanimated by their juxtaposition. Here, language (my metaphorical dead horse), along with the social identities it produces, is like Quixote's skinny nag Rocinante, who by all rights should be dead but who keeps lurching doggedly forward to the next flogging. In Acker's version, the old horse often described by Cervantes as a "hack" acquires the nickname "Hackneyed." Aside from the association with hackneys, the plodding and reliable work horses once used to draw London cabs, the horse's new name also, of course, refers to tired and commercially corrupted ways of writing. ("Hackney" can also mean a prostitute of the non-literary sort.) Acker's narrator notes the name's evocation of fruitless repetition, telling us that "Hackneyed" means "'a writer' or 'an attempt to have an identity that always fails'" (10). And indeed, stable new identity never emerges from Quixote's quest or from Acker's novel, for the characters move from one borrowed text to another, frequently switching names, genders, and even species. But in the repeated attempt to reread and rewrite the dead language in a new context, the failure of identity to become stabilized creates a sense of liveliness, play, and subversive possibility.
5. Moran suggests that the failure of such pastiche to produce a wholly new language or a definitive new reader can itself become reified as a permanent condition and thus, in his argument, Acker's "textual" model of identity gives way to an "essentialist" model in which the apparent fluidity of identity collapses into the bohemian stereotype of the outsider or rebel, the person who is always defined against mainstream values: (glorious) failure embodied. When viewed from the perspective of the act of reading, rather than as a model of identity-construction, the failure of pastiche seems to lead to a more oppositional reading strategy. I would argue, however, that this oppositional mode is actually a symptom of "dead language" and the social relations embalmed within it, rather than an act of revivification and agency.
6. Acker attempts to put agency into pastiche by creating an "outsider" reader--someone who is not the typical implied reader of a patriarchal literary tradition. Within the text, this outsider is Quixote, the female knight. Through Quixote, Acker reveals the

paradoxical position available to the female reader/hero. Readers must be desiring beings, for desire moves us to read; yet women are positioned in this tradition as the passive objects of desire. Thus, one cannot both be active, able to join the classic textual reader/hero on his quest, and female, like the object of the hero's quest. As Acker puts it, "Finally Don Quixote understood her problem: she was both a woman therefore she couldn't feel [active] love and a knight in search of Love. She had had to become a knight, for she could solve this problem only by becoming partly male" (29). For Acker's Quixote, the ability to pursue sexual love is the key to female agency. Yet women who pursue sexual love have always been punished or written out of the text, and thus as Quixote puts it, the dilemma of female agency is, "If a woman insists she can and does love and her living isn't loveless or dead, she dies. So either a woman is dead or she dies" (33).

7. This impossible location leads Quixote to sift through other texts for a figure who is both exiled from the existing order and yet able to act upon it. This figure will represent the outsider reader who, her experience distorted or excluded by canonical texts, nevertheless turns those texts to her own purposes. Quixote settles on the pirate. The pirate is a thief, or a plagiarist like Acker herself. One of Quixote's companions, declaring herself a pirate, sings "I who will never own, whatever and whenever I want, I take" (199). Quixote suggests that this myth of the text-thieving, exiled pirate can be the basis not only for a mode of reading but for a different vision of community and social relations:

Even a woman who has the soul of a pirate, at least pirate morals, even a woman who prefers loneliness to the bickerings and constraints of heterosexual marriage, even such a woman who is a freak in our society needs a home.

Even freaks need homes, countries, language, communication.

The only characteristic freaks share is our knowledge that we don't fit in. Anywhere. It is for you, freaks my loves, I am writing and it is about you. (201-02)

By recombining the old, purloined chunks of language into a new pastiche, Acker claims, formerly exiled readers can create a language--and thus a community--that supports a different notion of (female) identity and female romantic-sexual desire. The agency to create that change depends on rereading from within a new, previously excluded context.

8. Acker's use of the image of the outlaw community of pirate-freaks, formed from the scraps of old stories, and her direct address here to "you, freaks my loves" raise important questions about which readers possess agency in her model. Does she, as Moran suggests, essentialize "the outsider" both as the reader in her text and as the reader of her text? Acker's novels from the 1980s do begin to reproduce certain predictable patterns, and these can seem to result in fixed and frozen relationships between readers and texts. But here it seems important to place Acker's desire for oppositional community in the context of the cultural politics of the 1980s. By situating Acker this way, I hope to identify those

elements of Don Quixote that might produce the most fruitful interventions in gendered and otherwise power-inflected modes of reading that persist far beyond the mid-1980s. Historicizing Acker may also account for some readers' sense of Acker's work as curiously dated or old-fashioned in its "punk" vehemence.

9. There is no doubt that Acker's writing came into its own at some point in the 1980s. In 1984, Acker's work was damned as failed parody and labeled "abusive to women" in *The New York Times Book Review* (Hoffman 16; qtd. in Jacobs 53). Four years later, the same publication installed her as the "darling of the mid-1980s downtown Manhattan arts scene" (Gill 9), comparing her to Gertrude Stein and paying tribute to "the seriousness of Ms. Acker's purpose" (Dillard 9). She had moved from obscure publishers to Grove in 1983. Moran traces her (slightly earlier) trajectory in Britain, with the "major breakthrough" being Picador's 1984 publication of *Blood and Guts in High School* and Acker's subsequent appearance on the television arts program, *The South Bank Show* (132).
10. Moran understands Acker's rise to fame from the Lower East Side milieu of the 1970s as part of the culture industry's tendency to gobble up "cool" subcultures. However, in Acker's specific case, Moran argues that that tendency was ironically abetted by the particularly local and personal context in which she had become a known personality:

I would suggest that Acker's avant-garde fame relied primarily on the fostering of a sense of dialogue and community between artist and audience which initially thrived within the concentrated atmosphere of New York's punk art scene in the late 1970s. As with many other avant-garde groupings, the feelings of marginality and difference from the mainstream created the need for a network of like-minded souls who could provide mutual support and encouragement. (139)

The speculative economy of the time led to an unprecedented acceleration in the commercialization and assimilation of arts subcultures.[1] In addition, the "sense of dialogue and community" that Acker's work brought from its initial position of "marginality and difference" found a certain kinship--albeit ambivalently--with the contemporaneous movement toward identity politics in academic (and, to some extent, popular) feminism.[2]

11. Writing in 1988, Jill Dolan defines "identity politics" as "the current tendency in feminism to valorize cultural and ethnic differences" (86). Indeed, the exploration of difference was a central concern of US feminism in the 1980s; much as Acker's work does, it brought together two strains of feminist theory--one focused on identity and another on its impossibility. Both were aimed at decentering a homogeneous "woman" that theorists saw as having merely replicated, within feminism, the hegemonic position of the mainstream male. Susan Gubar (perhaps understandably aggrieved, as a frequent target of allegations that the perspective of white women had monopolized academic feminism in the previous decade) traces these two strains in her sweeping critique of developments in feminist criticism during that period: the first was a series of essays and books that defined the terrain of

identity politics by emphasizing the axes of race, class, and sexuality as frequently more determinative than gender in their effects on experience, subjectivity, reading practices, and the location of common political interests. Gubar argues that much of this work fruitfully challenged the racial bias of an earlier feminism, but in doing so also implied the debilitating breaking down of the identities "woman" or "feminist" into an ever-proliferating "string of hyphenated adjectival qualifiers" (891). The second tendency was the work of poststructuralist feminists, who "sought to use the race-based interrogation of the term women" to question ideas of identity altogether (894). Although poststructuralism is ostensibly incompatible with the affirmations of authenticating experience often central to identity politics, Gubar suggests that the two often functioned hand-in-hand (in her view, destructively) to privilege difference as the key term in any epistemology, whether retaining the label "feminist" or not.

12. Acker was deeply ambivalent toward--if not outright suspicious of--various manifestations of identity politics within and outside the feminist movement. In an interview from the collection *Angry Women* (1991), Acker expresses both her desire to be recognized as "different" and a critique of those who mark such boundaries too exclusively:

A gay friend of mine said something interesting to me. I asked her if she differentiated between gay and straight women, and she said, "Yes, women who are gay are really outlaws, because we're totally outside the society--always." And I said, "What about people like me?" and she said, "Oh, you're just queer." Like--we didn't exist?! [laughs] It's as if the gay women position themselves as outside society, but meanwhile they're looking down on everybody who's perverse! Which is very peculiar.... (Juno 182; brackets and ellipses in original)

It is precisely in Acker's textual exploration of the "perverse" reader--in the way she positions implied readers of her sexually explicit scenes--that she offers a way of turning the tension between identity politics and poststructuralism into a fruitful articulation of difference. I will explore the "perverse reader" in more detail in a moment. Before I do, however, I want to explore the ways in which the intersection of the two strains of 80s feminism--and the resulting emphasis on difference--is evident in *Don Quixote* and other Acker novels from the period.

13. On the one hand, Acker's kinship with identity politics is made manifest in *Don Quixote* by her ongoing affirmation of difference as a fundamental and total condition--as illustrated by the passage on "freaks," above ("we don't fit in. Anywhere"), the recurring image of the pirate or outlaw, and by her development of an epistemology based on reading from the position of the unorthodox and impossible (because either she "is dead or she dies" [33]) sexually desiring woman. On the other hand, Acker's allegiance to a more poststructuralist tendency is evident not only in her explicit and much noted references to particular theorists and their concepts--for example, two characters' discussion of Deleuze and Guattari, Lacan, Althusser, Derrida, and Foucault (54)--but also in

her refusal to respect the identity-category boundaries drawn between various groups of outsiders.

14. For example, in a "vision" that Quixote recounts toward the end of the novel, Acker appears to appropriate the practice of Voodoo as an image of her own subversive textual bricolage. Quixote describes a "little church":

The church was a Haitian church. Being Haitian it held all practices including every sort of fucking and Voodoun. All ways were allowed: all cultures: aloud.... Inside, the priests use nailpolish bottles, raw rums, and whatever they can get their hands on for everything. (193)

Here, as elsewhere, Acker transmutes apparently stable cultural differences--here the culturally specific religious practice of Voodoo--into a disruptive textual strategy. In her earlier *My Death My Life* by Pier Paolo Pasolini, Voodoo appears even more explicitly as a disruptive and "nominalist" textual strategy. In *Don Quixote*, Acker likewise uses over-simplified notions of Arabic cultural tradition to construct another *mise-en-abyme* (as she will do in her later novel, *Empire of the Senseless*):

Unlike American and Western culture (generally), the Arabs (in their culture) have no (concept of) originality. That is, culture. They write new stories paint new pictures et cetera only by embellishing old stories pictures... They write by cutting chunks out of all-ready written texts and in other ways defacing traditions: changing important names into silly ones, making dirty jokes out of matters that should be of the utmost importance to us such as nuclear warfare. (25; ellipses in original)

Then--like the "Arabs" whose cultural construction she clearly parodies--Acker proceeds to "mak[e] dirty jokes out of matters that should be of the utmost importance to us such as nuclear warfare" as she stages a scene in which Richard Nixon dismisses the SALT negotiations while engaged in sex with his wife (110).

15. Haitian Voodoo practitioners or Arabs--such indiscriminate, dehistoricized appropriations of various marginalized identities or experiences within the text may function in two somewhat contradictory ways: to mark a radical skepticism toward the construction and narration of identity, and also to signify a desire for an undivided community of rebels, unified by their shared exile from the social mainstream. It is possible that by blurring together the two approaches to difference, Acker risks losing the potential benefits of both: in creating a universal "other" marked only by non-specific difference, she compromises the resistant power of particular, local histories (one of the strengths of identity politics) while simultaneously giving up poststructuralism's deconstructive ability to work upon the difference also inherent in the hegemonic male subject. My question is, to what extent does the reading practice that Acker offers in *Don Quixote* leave the implied reader locked, albeit oppositionally, within the "dead" and deadening social relations inscribed in the original texts she borrows, simply occupying the space they reserve

for the "other"? To answer this question, I want to focus on her construction of the previously excluded reader as the location from which the novel's implied reader approaches the incorporated materials that comprise its pastiche.

16. I turn, again, to Jameson, specifically, to the sections of Postmodernism in which his attention shifts from the text and its production to the effects of reading pastiche. Jameson redirects his focus in order to answer a question that is similar to the one I'm asking here of pastiche in Acker's work: whether textual pastiche can open up the control of literary meaning to a wider range of (less conventionally privileged) readers and ways of reading. Discussing aspects of Claude Simon's *Conducting Bodies* (*Les corps conducteurs*), Jameson suggests that "for one long moment, the moment in which we read [such] texts," the process of reading becomes not mere reception but itself an active moment of textual production (146). The reader must work to produce the text because Simon's extensive use of dislocation (in terms of plot, character, and scene description) and his incorporation of other, borrowed texts and images--techniques shared by Don Quixote--make it impossible to "make sense" in any conventional, more passive fashion.
17. Jameson speculates that this moment of reading as active production--a moment which I would call a potential moment of agency--might also present something of a utopian image of labor. Primarily, of course, producer and consumer become one--self-sufficient and self-sustaining--as the single reader embodies both roles. But there is also a more complex change taking place; Jameson suggests that in these circumstances, "reading undergoes a remarkable specialization and, very much like older handicraft activity at the onset of the industrial revolution, is dissociated into a variety of distinct processes according to the general law of the division of labor" (140). Rather than merely contributing to the displacement and dehumanization of the skilled craftsman, such processes of "deskilling" also entail a certain democratization, creating "forms of labor that anyone can do" (146). This analogy adds a material-historical angle to the openness and multiplicity of the Barthesian "text," implying its availability not only to more numerous readings but also to more numerous readers. The new, active reading required by Simon's novel and Acker's, therefore, might not only produce agency (as readers, like Acker herself, find new ways to make use of the text in question) but might also render the traditional materials of western culture available to use by more diverse groups of people--not just the original, intended readers.
18. This "deskilled" reading certainly seems evident within Acker's novel, where her Quixote stands in for the reader of the novel; both in the specific textual interpretations Acker's Quixote performs and in her overall language and tone as narrator, Quixote seems to model a sort of subversive stupidity. Following Cervantes's mad knight, Acker's protagonist is the very type of the misreading literalist, reading at a level of interpretation that "anyone could do." She is not only the wrong (unintended) reader of these "male texts"; she also consistently reads wrong, as when she (again following Cervantes) mistakes a procession of penitents

carrying a figure of the Virgin Mary for a kidnapping in progress (177). As far as there is one narrative voice among all the shifting fragments, it is the voice of a stubborn misreader, a reader who consistently focuses on the wrong things and fails to notice the things to which she should pay attention if she were to produce a sophisticated reading. This narrative voice thinks Shakespeare's Juliet is supposed to be a nymphomaniac; later, speaking as Jane Eyre, she complains that the worst thing about her boarding school is the lack of privacy in the dormitory for masturbation. Likewise, Acker's language is relentlessly non-literary, profane, and full of slang: for instance, her Oedipus declares non-poetically, "I am the biggest shit in the world" (147).

19. Acker's exemplary (mis)reader might be likened to Bakhtin's carnival fool, whose apparently stupid insistence on supposedly minor or self-evident points reveals society's hypocrisy and the fundamental contradictions of ideology (Bauer 11). The carnival fool's stupidity is a weapon against the words and the power of the mighty. In this sense, Acker's deliberate "dumbing down" and lowering into bawdiness of canonical great works might also be a democratization.
20. However, Jameson ultimately concludes in the case of Claude Simon that the equation of "deskilled" reading with democratization of the text does not, in fact, hold up. Simon's textual pastiche fails to offer a sustainable image of utopian conditions of production precisely because of its fragmentation and multiplicity. Echoing the famed Brecht-Lukács debates about modernist technique, Jameson concludes that such art can only offer knowledge of society in the form of "symptom[s]" or random "data"; these data fail to cohere into an overall vision of society as a totality (151).
21. Jameson also offers what I would call a common-sense reason why these texts' production of a level of reading that "anyone can do" does not result in greater readerly access: he stops to ask who actually reads "so highly technical an elite literary artifact" (146). While access to the means of production may exist in theory, in material terms "the very experience of art itself today is alienated and made 'other' and inaccessible to too many people to serve as a useful vehicle for their imaginative experience" (147). And if this is true of "art itself," it need not be demonstrated that stylistically complex novels like Don Quixote are an even more specialized and rarefied taste, no matter how critical they may be of the closed world of traditional literature. This is, of course, part of their "hip" allure.
22. I would go further, to suggest that the conditions limiting who actually reads reside not only in social relations extrinsic to the text (although these are frequently the most compelling barriers to access); they are also written into Acker's practice. By this I don't mean that pastiche, like satire, necessitates a certain level of education or familiarity with the original texts being borrowed, if one is to "get it" in full. I do not mean, in other words, that one must actually be skilled to catch on to Acker's "deskilled" reading, for her irreverent and anti-aesthetic tone, her blunt and obscene vocabulary, her incorporation of some widely-known sources

(such as popular Shakespeare plays and "commercial" movies), and her focus on scenes of political and personal abuse and domination allow more casual readers, I would argue, to understand a large part of what she's doing.

23. Rather, Acker constructs a reading dynamic that depends on a double construction: an implied "insider," the conventionally right reader who has an insider's relation to the textual tradition Acker invokes and a more powerfully implied "outsider," the wrong reader, the freak. This "freak reader" is defined against that other, shadow reader. To take up any agency Acker's strategy might offer, you may not need to know the original texts, but you do need to know that another, more authorized way of reading them preceded Acker's/Quixote's--and that against that authorized reading you must also define your own.
24. In *Don Quixote* and elsewhere, Acker tacitly privileges the deskilled reading and the freak reader in the way she deploys obscenity and sexuality. She often inserts obscenity into canonical texts, or juxtaposes them with originally obscene materials such as, in *Don Quixote*, an episode from the Marquis de Sade's *Justine*. The sexuality of Acker's novels never tries to pass as literary erotica; rather, it is bluntly rendered in the language of hard-core pornography ("fuck," "cock," and "cunt"), frequently violent and abusive and, when not so, often puerile and scatological ("I'd like to fuck the shit out of you. I'd like to stick my thingy-dingy up your witchy-washy" [88]). Her work has been branded pornographic and sexist, both by critics and by customs officers eager to confiscate offensive materials. While I see Acker as neither pornographic nor sexist, it seems clear that she intends to scandalize precisely those readers who do. Moreover, she uses this process of scandalization to privilege the "freak" reader. Those readers who are not offended are aware, as they read on, of the other more "typical" reaction to the text. They are thereby invited to identify themselves against those who find explicit sexuality offensive. Acker directly invokes the offended reader in *Don Quixote* by listing anti-pornography feminist Andrea Dworkin among the "evil enchanters" with whom Quixote must do battle (102). Those who read on thus allow themselves to be interpolated among the "freaks my loves," the different readers implied by the text, whose awareness of difference depends upon an awareness of what the more "normal" reader must think.
25. However, there is much more going on in Acker's obscenity than the calculated attempt to shock--which contributes to the feeling of predictability (flogging a dead horse) I posited above. The "pornographic" scenes in *Don Quixote* function to bring reading down to its most basic, bodily elements and uses; they are also key to Quixote's quest for an active female desire. More importantly for my argument, it may be at these very moments in the text, where I have suggested that the distinction between a presumed hegemonic reader and the "freak" reader is made most apparent, that something more complex takes place that in fact disrupts and destabilizes any easy binary between inside and outside reading locations. In Acker's obscene scenes, a third possible implied reader appears.
26. This is where my argument most diverges from Moran's. In his focus

on the construction of "Kathy Acker" as a brand name, as an unwilling part of the commodification process that sells her texts, Moran sees the sexual and the shockingly violent scenes in her work as simply playing into the ongoing combination of a discourse of risqué, bohemian authenticity with a frisson of trendily poststructuralist intellectual capital. He argues that Acker's use of "sexually explicit, violent material often perceived as 'confessional,'" when combined with the more theoretical and experimental elements, creates a "persona [that] is particularly appealing to celebrity culture... because it suggests that the self can be reinvented at the same time as it points to the existence of an innate, deep-seated identity" (144). The sex scenes, in other words, let readers have their cake and eat it too, while draining Acker's work of its critique of social relations: readers get the commodified version of identity-politics-as-autobiography (access to others' "unusual" or "colorful" experiences) and all the hipness of postmodernism. (None of this, Moran is careful to note, necessarily discredits Acker's writing.)

27. However, another way of looking at these elements of Acker's work in this particular context of the mainstreaming of debates over "difference" is to see her as capitalizing upon the uneasy recognition of difference in ways of reading that arose from anti-pornography feminist theorizing. I have argued elsewhere that, increasingly in the 1980s, the issue of pornography and, more broadly, obscenity offered some feminists a rallying point that promised to restore to feminism its sense of unified oppositionality--based, as that sense originally was, on claims of women's fundamental difference from male society--and to patch up the divisions within feminism to which advocates of identity politics had demanded attention. If anti-pornography activism seemed to offer a way of transcending (or avoiding) the differences among women, it did so by relocating difference elsewhere. In its cruder forms, anti-pornography feminism asserts a clear divergence between women's sexuality (whether lesbian or heterosexual) and men's (gay or heterosexual); but often it develops a much subtler assertion of a less essentialized difference, that between two imagined groups of readers of pornography: those who are taken in by it (primarily men, but also women) and those who can "rise above it" in order to see it critically (see Pitchford).
28. Reading pornography for other than pornographic purposes--whether one reads as a feminist protester or an academic theorist, a historian, or a censor--itself entails imagining another reader who reads differently. Walter Kendrick's research into the history of public discourse about pornography suggests that its critics have consistently constructed the reader of porn as "someone else," usually in terms of both class and gender; usually, this someone is presumed to be taken in by the text--and vulnerable to its suggestions and distortions--in ways that the more dispassionate critic claims not to be. While the critic tends to imagine himself or herself as immune to the pornographic text's intentions, his or her paternalistic concern about such texts centers on the image of other readers who are unable to be critical. So for the critic, the act of looking at pornography is always haunted by the shadowy presence of this other, intended reader and his or her imagined reading--the reading for which the text was ostensibly designed.

29. Acker's sexual scenes are not pornographic; their primary purpose is not to arouse the reader (although arousal may be, of course, a secondary effect, and source of reading pleasure, albeit an ideologically troubling pleasure for some readers). Nevertheless, reading such scenes, in the context in which Acker's pastiche places them, involves taking on a position something like that of the idealized critic of pornography: one is haunted by the awareness of arousal taking place elsewhere, in the previous lives or original intentions of these images and these words. As with the other borrowed texts and language, Acker's female knight is the wrong reader of these sexual materials--because, as she has asserted, women are not supposed by conventional discourse to have autonomous sexual desires. Again the original, implied (pornographic) reader of the text or language Acker borrows is not identical to the implied freak reader of Acker's text, whose representative or point of identification is Quixote. However, neither is the original implied reader of pornography identical to the "inside" or hegemonic literary reader I've been talking about so far (as Quixote's/the freak's other). So, in fact, there are two "other" readers lurking behind Acker's explicitly sexual scenes: there is the stereotypical implied reader of porn, the solitary male masturbator; and there is the mainstream literary reader--and this now includes the middle-class, anti-porn feminist reader--who might be shocked by such material.[3] Neither of these reactions or ways of reading is Quixote's, and neither of them is the reaction Acker asks of her freaks.

30. The explicit sexual discourse in Acker's writing complicates the reader's subject position, rescuing it from what I have referred to as the potentially flogged-to-death opposition between the "inside," traditional reader and the "outside," freak reader (and I think this is true whether her actual reader is the exiled female reader or not). In at least one spot in *Don Quixote*, Acker's text makes explicit this more complex triangulation of the implied readers. Here, she incorporates passages from one of Catullus's love poems in their original Latin, with what starts out as a standard grammatical gloss, in English, printed alongside in a parallel column (for instance, "The subjunctive mood takes precedence over the straightforward active" [47]); but both the poem and the grammatical reading of it are quickly invaded by another reading, in the form of the highly personal and sometimes explicitly sexual voice of a lover, which breaks into the Latin lines and turns the accompanying analysis of tenses into personal musings on time and loss--as in this excerpt:

nunc iam illa non vult: tu	
quoque,	
impotens can't fuck any	
boyfriends these days, bad	
mood no wonder I'm acting	
badly, noli NO	
nec quae fugit sectare, nec miser	My present is negative.
vive	This present becomes
good advice sed obstinata mente	imaginary: The future of
perfer, obdura.	amabitur and the
vale, puella. (My awful telephone	subjunctive at the

call. This's my apology, Peter. beginning of the poem? (48)

This scene occurs near the start of the section, "Other Texts," which has as its heading or epigraph the announcement that Quixote can only proceed by "read[ing] male texts which weren't hers." Acker begins by presenting a canonical, male-authored text about sexual/romantic desire alongside, literally, a standard way of reading that text; the latter renders visible on the page the conventional implied reader--perhaps not the reader originally intended by Catullus, but the reader implied by contemporary publications of his poems in Latin text books, an objective and privileged reader on the inside of the educational system. The second reader, whose voice breaks into both the canonical text and the "inside" reading of it, is the desiring female freak whose "present is negative" and "imaginary" because her desire is impermissible; she "can't fuck any boyfriends" and must ask forgiveness for speaking passionately--from a lover named Peter, whose name evokes on the one hand the desired male sexual organ and, on the other, both God's judge, St. Peter (and his earthly avatar, the Pope--thus, church authority), and the city of St. Petersburg, which has been described a page earlier as "cool [and] cold," designed by architects to restrain and contain "unhandlable passion" (46).

31. So here is the "male text" and its two, quite opposite readers. The third implied reader--whom I have called the pornographic reader--appears as Acker follows this borrowed poem with what appear to be her own translations of two other poems from the *Catulli Carmina*. In the next, two central lines read like dialogue from a hard-core movie:

take it kiss me do it grab me
grab my arms grab my ankles grab my cunt hairs. (49)

I would argue that, whether or not Acker's reader knows that the original text--by which I mean Catullus's poem, rather than the less specific text of pornography echoed here--speaks of nothing more graphic than the lovers exchanging thousands of kisses, this is a moment when the explicit evocation of sex intrudes upon both the ways of reading (or elsewhere-implied readers) that had been laid out explicitly in relation to the previous poem. First, these lines clearly imply or invite a shocked reaction from the "inside" reader represented by the standard academic gloss. But they also embody a far more direct, visceral, and, in a sense, authorized desire than that articulated in the voice of the "freak" reader (Quixote? Acker?) above. Their language evokes how women tend to speak in heterosexual pornography--that is, in texts conventionally aimed at male "one-handed readers," where female sexual desire (or a male vision of it) is welcomed and is articulated openly, greedily, and continually--but toward ends very different from those of Acker's desiring knight/reader. Only somewhere in the interplay between all three of these implied readers--academic insider, female freak, and male masturbator--can the text in pastiche yield a new life, one that offers a voice to articulate female desire and agency for change.

32. Thus sexual desire breaks down the reader's distance from the text

and her simple position of polar difference from the canonical reader here. The sexual portions of Acker's text show more than any others that agency derives not simply from identifying the gaps and inconsistencies of a patriarchal textual tradition, from the cleanly and permanently outside location of the excluded reader; rather, agency also depends on the active articulation of desire, and on rewriting those texts to include and articulate that desire. The position of Acker's reader is ultimately both outside the text and inside it, bound to enter it because of its offer of a language that might speak desire.

33. I close with one last echo of my phrase "flogging a dead language," to cite the repeated scenes--there are at least three--of consensual sexual whipping in Acker's novel. (These are perhaps floggings in a dead language.) Certainly, the rituals and trappings of sadistic and masochistic sex play, when used as signifiers of simple transgression, can become as exhausted and lifeless as any other signifiers. In such contexts they can merely recreate, in dead immobility, an oppositional relation between two social groups--"them" and "us," imagined bourgeoisie and freaks. But in Acker's hands, these sexual scenes enact a more complex dynamic between readers and text, and between freak readers and other possible readers. In sexual flogging, a painful act intended for punishment and correction is appropriated as a source of sexual pleasure. Similarly, by appealing to "freak" desires, Acker is able to appropriate the "dead language" of pastiche to create a new place of possibility for her reader, a place beyond the pointless redundancy of repetition and mere opposition.

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Notes

1. Walter Kalaidjian notes that more than 40 new galleries opened

in New York City during the 1980s (254).

2. Susan Gubar cites a number of influential volumes and essays as central intersection points of identity politics and feminist theorizing in the 1980s: Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's 1981 *This Bridge Called My Back*, bell hooks's *Ain't I a Woman* (also 1981), Audre Lorde's *Zami* (1982) and *Sister Outsider* (1984), Barbara Christian's "The Race for Theory" (1988), and Barbara Smith's "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" (1977; included in Elaine Showalter's edited collection, *The New Feminist Criticism*, in 1985). Jill Dolan, in her discussion of identity politics (86), adds Smith's collection, *Home Girls* (1983), and Evelyn Torton Beck's edited volume, *Nice Jewish Girls* (1982).

3. Laura Kipnis's reading of *Hustler* magazine further complicates this scenario of readers-imagining-other-readers; she proposes that part of the pleasure even for *Hustler*'s intended (i.e., what I am calling "pornographic") readers is a sense of transgressing against the "bourgeois proprieties" of imagined others (388).

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